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Bringing classes home

Surge in online courses opens college to many

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Balancing a full-time job, occasional weekend training sessions with the Kentucky National Guard and three daughters ages 5 and younger is a big challenge for David Gentry. Throw in a couple of reading-intense college history and English courses, and his schedule is bursting at the seams.

But Gentry, 39, participates in **class** discussions and completes his assignments during the rare nooks and crannies of free time through Bluegrass Community and Technical College's online **classes**.

Gentry, who is working toward a master's in education so he can teach high school, is among the ever-growing ranks of students who are forgoing the classroom to amass credits online.

Kentucky has seen a nearly 25 percent increase in students taking online **classes** over the last year, according to the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education.

That's twice the rate of increase for colleges nationwide, according to survey figures from the Massachusetts-based Sloan Consortium, which tracks distance- learning trends.

No college in the state has seen sharper growth in online enrollment than BCTC in Lexington, where Gentry is taking his general education courses.

Enrollment in BCTC's online **classes** has jumped from 3,634 students in spring 2008 to 5,775 this semester, a leap of nearly 60 percent.

"We have found students asking for it," said Dave Hellmich, BCTC's academic vice president.

"With online **classes**, they alleviate geographic and time barriers."

Many students, such as Gentry, are trying to fulfill general requirements on their way to getting bachelor's or master's degrees at four-year colleges. Typically, they are older than the fresh-out-of-high-school crowd and are balancing work, school and family.

"The stereotypical student in online courses is a 37-year old mom from a rural area," said Allen Lind, Vice President for Information and Technology at the Council on Postsecondary Education.

Indeed, the 10 counties with the highest percentage of their college students enrolled in online courses were all outside major urban areas.

A confluence of forces are driving more students online, educators say. High gas prices last year discouraged commuter students. The economy has prompted many displaced workers to go back to school. And online courses are becoming more available and inviting.

This semester, BCTC offers 347 sections online, Hellmich said.

"Fifteen years ago, I wouldn't have touched it. But the course management systems and increased bandwidth make it much easier to use," said Hellmich, who is teaching a freshman composition **class** online this spring.

Distance learning programs use **class**-hosting sites such as Blackboard to cover the same material in traditional courses.

But the online **classes** change the dynamics of student interactions. For instance, written discussion boards prevent gregarious personalities from taking over conversations, as they can during in-**class** debates.

Still, just because **classes** are largely conducted in writing doesn't mean student-instructor interactions suffer.

"I find that discussion boards can be more thoughtful because students have a chance to think about the topic at greater length," said Ben Worth, a BCTC English professor and associate dean for humanities. "And in some ways, the work is more difficult (for students) because you can't really hide like you're in a traditional **class** if you haven't done the work. You can't just sit in the back and pull your baseball cap over your eyes."

Worth, who has been teaching online courses since 2002, now mentors other instructors who move to online **classes**.

Testing in distance-learning courses is another big change. Instructors generally try to prevent cheating by relying on timed, open-note tests or by requiring students to come to **class** for one or two proctored exams each semester.

Those who can't attend will have their exams proctored by a public librarian or, if the student is in the military, by a commanding officer, Worth said.

Gentry, who lives in Lexington and runs the drug testing program for the Kentucky National Guard, said the online courses take some getting used to.

"When I started last semester, I would check in on my computer twice a day to make sure I didn't miss anything," he said. "I was a little paranoid. You're always checking in and finding what to do next, but I've found I don't have to do it that often. I'm not as bad this semester."

Gentry said he usually spends one to two hours a night reading and studying.

He'll often "have to down-shift" from reading the Berenstain Bears to his girls, ages 5, nearly 3 and 11 months, to slogging his way through The Scarlet Letter.

"It's a matter of finding time," he said. "You don't have to go to **class**, but you really have to force yourself to study."

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